In the United States, *Power of the Powerless* is arguably Havel’s most well-known text: it is required reading in many courses in History and Political Science as one of the most influential “dissident” essays ever written. As such, it is read primarily as an essay about a specific socio-historical context.

I will argue that this approach represents a fundamental misreading of *Power*. A reading that primarily historicizes cannot situate the essay comfortably within Havel’s oeuvre as a whole, nor is it how Havel asks that *Power* be read. While the essay is grounded in a specific socio-historical context, its meaning – as Havel makes clear – is not reducible to that particular context. *Power* is much less about politics in totalitarian Czechoslovakia than it is about human identity in the modern world.

The humanities-oriented reading that I propose takes Havel at face value in emphasizing the existential level of his analysis and in exploring how and why *Power* is as much about us as it was about them.

For the purposes of this paper, my focus will fall on Havel’s systematic redefinition of ideology as an existential phenomenon. How does Havel metaphorize ideology? What does it mean to understand ideology as a way of being characteristic of the modern age rather than as a set of political beliefs? To what extent is Havel’s analysis applicable to contemporary America?

My approach is informed by existing critical treatments of *Power* (eg, Keane and Tucker) as well as by Goldfarb’s work on the “post-totalitarian mind”.

**Works Cited**

